



Brief of GWA Chairperson – Sara Ahmed’s editorial piece for the ANU Asia Pacific Week, 27 – 30 January 2009:-

Flowing Upstream: Unpacking gender in AusAid’s water, sanitation and hygiene strategy

Images of women trudging miles over hot, barren landscapes precariously balancing heavy water pots on their heads or standing at long queues in urban slums are not uncommon across much of the Asia-Pacific region. Neither are images of women irrigating small landholdings, experimenting with drip irrigation, operating a treadle pump, marketing fish, developing aquaculture and dairying or rowing their children and meagre household belongings to dry-land in flood affected villages. That women and men have multiple, often diverse and sometimes conflicting relationships with water is now well recognized. Water is key to sustainable livelihoods, poverty alleviation and to gender empowerment, yet access to water for domestic, productive and personal use, including sanitation and hygiene, remains a distant pipe-dream for millions of poor women in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is therefore, a welcome sign that AusAID’s draft water, sanitation and hygiene strategy (November 2008) recognizes that gender equality is critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), particularly MDG 7 which calls for ‘halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015, relative to 1990 levels.’ Although gender or sex disaggregated data on access to water and sanitation is non-existent, according to the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, progress on achieving the MDGs globally is mixed: while South East Asia is on track for meeting both the drinking water supply and sanitation targets, Oceania (PNG and the Pacific) is not on track for meeting either and South Asia will only be able to meet its drinking water target at best (Annex 1, AusAID Strategy 2008). However, macro-level data hide regional, community and intra-household disparities in terms of *who* has access to *how much* water at *what* price or *who* participates in decision-making on the citing of water infrastructure, tariffs and allocation norms?

Deeply embedded gender inequalities in terms of access to education, health care, economic opportunities or control over resources such as land, place poor, marginalised women in much of the Asia-Pacific region at multiple levels of disadvantage, discrimination and exploitation vis-à-vis men even within the same socio-economic category. Water supply and sanitation interventions have the potential of improving the lives of poor women and men, but these are often based on assumptions of what women need – safe, accessible water and sanitation – rather than *also* what women want – sharing of domestic responsibilities around water and the care economy – thus, reinforcing gender inequities in access to water and decision-making on water governance.

While the AusAid strategy recognises the importance of capacity building for women and gender sensitisation for men to facilitate women’s participation, all too often these are reduced to simple technical exercises like a gender-awareness workshop or lessons on good hygiene practices or handpump maintenance. Participation is used as a term to validate numerous activities including legitimizing expenditure, reducing operational costs and improving the public image of bureaucratic mismanagement and languishing infrastructure. Such an instrumentalist approach to participation sees women and men as objects, and fails to build their political

articulation or voice as water leaders and decision-makers. Instead it reinforces perceptions of women as naturally privileged environmental caretakers, willing to extend their unpaid domestic roles to the public domain as altruistic water managers.

New, community water systems not only seek to rebuild collective identities around the social organisation of water they also ostensibly highlight the 'modern' woman who is keen to have and willing to pay for tapped water or a clean toilet, while balancing other livelihood needs. Understandably these are basic human rights, but there is little questioning of who continues to collect water, even when it is at one's doorstep or who keeps the toilet clean or manages household health and hygiene needs.

Sector reforms throughout the region have created space for water users, particularly women, to participate in decentralised (or administratively de-concentrated) water management through quotas in community institutions. But if gender mainstreaming in water policies and practices is to be a transformatory process then it needs to begin by reflecting on the micro-discourses of power that shape women and men's myriad relationships with water, the environment and society.

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